

Interview: Alain Soldeville for Bugis Street

By Clara Lim | Jan 23, 2014

<http://is.asia-city.com/events/article/interview-alain-soldeville-bugis-street>

1. Tell us about the exhibition.

The exhibition shows the first series I made in the beginning of 1981 when I photographed the life of the transsexual community of Bugis Street. I forgot about those photos for 25 years.

2. Tell us what inspired you? Tell us the story behind this collection of portraits.

When i arrived in Singapore in February 1981, I was on my way for a two-year trip to Asia. I was dreaming to be a professional photographer. I had read an article about Bugis street and I was curious about it. I was interested by transexuality and i had read about the subject when I was in France.

I bought a Nikon camera and i began to spend my nights on Bugis street in a neighborhood of old Chinese houses from the colonial era. I met Anita, a Malaysian transsexual who introduced me to her community. I was 23 years old then and most of the girls were about the same age as me. Little by little we felt close to each other. They liked having me photograph them and would pose like stars. I think i wanted to make their portraits showing their femininity. I was fascinated by their ambiguous identity and their inner strength living as outcasts on the edges of society. They had a feeling of melancholy for the life they left behind and a resentment for the injustice of the hard life they were obliged to have. After five or six weeks in Singapore I had to leave for Australia. I would return in 1984 at the same time that the area was about to be torn down to make way for the subway. For more than twenty five years, I completely forgot those photos. It's only recently that I came across them. Looking at the slides, i was surprised by the strange and beautiful nightlights, a mix of artificial lights which were hard to deal with photographing with films. The strange colors and the girls poses gives a feeling of cinematographic artificiality. It reminds me of the atmosphere of Wong Kar Wai films. In 1981 my visual education was mostly coming from cinema and i maybe liked Bugis street because unconsciously it looked to me like a film set.

3. How does this relate to your previous shows?

That series is a youth production but at the same time it has some elements central to my art works: identity issues, the symbolism of the body, consumerism, globalization.

4. What do you want your audience to get out of the show?

I think art goes and the general public will find an open window to Singapore during the eighties. They will discover the nightlife which was world famous at that time and my personal and poetic way to show it. Bugis street and his memory are parts of Singapore's history even if the globalized ways of consumerism has made the street disappearing.